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ABSTRACT

Some of the major assumptions, empirical inferences, and theoretical linkages that underlie the generalization that interpersonal influence is more efficacious than mass communication in bringing about social change are examined in this paper. The central premise of the paper is that the presumed competition between mass and interpersonal channels is a synthetic one, created by observers who reify "channel effects" based on the ways sources of messages, rather than receivers, utilize different channels. The paper argues that people's relative reliance on information from mass or interpersonal channels as a guide to behavior is not strongly modified by channel characteristics and is not a reliable indicator of channel-oriented motivations or preferences. It contends that instead, channel use is determined mostly by structural factors in the organization of a person's information environment. The paper further argues that the sources a person consults for information relevant to a personal decision are determined mainly by their accessibility and by the likelihood that they will contain such information. (FL)

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MASS MEDIA VS. INTERPERSONAL CHANNELS: THE SYNTHETIC COMPETITION

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MASS MEDIA VS. INTERPERSONAL CHANNELS: THE SYNTHETIC COMPETITION

One of the most durable policy generalizations derived from research on human communication is that interpersonal influence is more efficacious than mass communication in bringing about social change. Campaigns, corporations, and even countries are advised that mass media, while perhaps necessary to achieve economies of scale, are inferior to real, personal contact as a means of persuading people to change their behavior. Of course no one sophisticated in the research literature would make such a sweeping statement unhedged by limitations, exceptions, and caveats. But in transliteration from academic reviews to the more streamlined advice that circulates in communication planning circles, the image of powerful interpersonal processes comes through with unmistakable clarity.

This paper examines some of the major assumptions, empirical inferences, and theoretical linkages that underlie this generalization. The central premise here is that the presumed competition between mass and interpersonal channels is a synthetic one, created by observers who reify "channel effects" based on the ways sources of messages, rather than receivers, utilize different channels. People's relative reliance on information from mass or interpersonal channels as a guide to behavior is not strongly modified by channel characteristics, and is not a reliable indicator of channel-oriented motivations or preferences. Instead, channel use is determined mostly by structural factors in the organization of a person's information environment.

It will be argued (below) that the sources a person consults for information relevant to a personal decision are determined mainly by their accessibility, and by the likelihood that they will contain such information. Accessibility includes variation in both message-sending and information-seeking behavior: How frequently does a message's source contact the person via a given channel? And how easy is it for the person to consult an information source via a given channel?

The second question normally comes up much less often than the first, which is to say that much information flow in society often simply happens to the person without any

purposive information-seeking.[1] Motivated attempts to gather information are activated only in those relatively rare instances where a change in behavior is contemplated that involves a substantial risk of adverse consequences if an incorrect decision is made.[2] In such a situation, the person might reasonably seek information from all available channels, with little regard to whether they are personal or mediated, "at the mouth." People, after all, provide the information conveyed by the media, and the media in turn disseminate much of the information people have to pass on. A consumer of information regarding a consequential decision is unlikely to limit himself to a single channel; instead, he should consult the most accessible channels until his confidence in his information's accuracy is commensurate with its importance to him.[3] Credulity is attached to the information itself, as a result of cross-checking it via several channels; through such use he might develop a sense of differential credibility of various channels, putting greater trust in those which he uses most often.[4]

Before exploring the empirical basis for the preceding outline, however, it is necessary to consider the prevailing interpretation that interpersonal channels are more persuasive than mass media. The main empirical referents in this formulation include the following. First, people use interpersonal channels more when they are adopting a new behavior or making a decision; media provide mainly a channel of early "awareness" information.[5] Second, a person's contacts tend to be with others who are similar to him, in demographic social activity characteristics, and also in terms of social values and political opinions.[6] In homespun terms, "Likes talk to likes"; in fancier terminology, conversations are mostly homophilic, not heterophilic.[7] A third observation is that a message from a source of low credibility, which is to say from someone who has reason to lie or no special reason to know what he is talking about, is less likely to be accepted and acted upon than would be a seemingly identical message from a more trustworthy or expert source.[8] These three findings have been replicated often enough that we should treat them as statistical facts, i.e. as outcomes that ought to be accounted for by any theoretical explanation that is offered.

The Homophily-Credibility Explanation

An interconnected set of social psychological linkages has been inferred to tie the foregoing empirical observations to the conclusion that interpersonal channels are more persuasive than mass media. Perhaps the most central of these theoretical relationships is the one between channel-receiver similarity or homophily, and the degree of credibility that channel carries for the receiver.[9] Interpersonal contacts, the reasoning runs, are homophilic and therefore credible; consequently the messages they deliver are likely to be believed and acted upon. Messages from the impersonal mass media are not believed, because channel-receiver heterophily (or non-homophily) implies lower credibility. A media message may be learned cognitively, but still not accepted until corroborated via a homophilic channel. Decision or action, then, is withheld pending interpersonal discussion.

Although this explanation is consistent with the empirical findings noted above, and while it probably describes processes that occur under certain limited conditions, there is considerable evidence to suggest that it does not account for the general case.

First, credibility is not a stable attribution that a person assigns consistently to a channel. Several studies have shown that credibility is highly situational, in that it can be modified significantly by sending the person a message that is different from the one expected.[10] Nor is credibility a singular dimension of judgment; in one analysis it was found to fragment into 41 different factors.[11] The two main dimensions of credibility that have typically been manipulated in persuasion experiments, and which regularly show up as strong factors in source-image studies, are the two rather different elements mentioned earlier: expertise, and the perception that a source or channel has reason to be other than truthful.[12]

When a message has been sent, as in a persuasion experiment, the source's expertise and trustworthiness may indeed govern its acceptance. But this does not necessarily mean that these factors are important in a person's search for information in a field situation. In particular, untrustworthy sources of opposite intention can, if they provide identical information, be collectively more believable than would one, or even two, "objective" sources.[13] For example, if opposing candidates for office agree in their

accounts of a recent event, this common interpretation is probably no less credible than if it had been transmitted by the AP and/or UPI.

When information-seeking is undertaken, expertise is probably an important criterion, although not so important as is simple accessibility. More particularly, whereas accessibility is an attribute of a channel, expertise is an attribute of sources that send information via that channel. This distinction is critical with respect to mass media, i.e. channels in which inexpert reporters and editors gather and cross-check information from more expert sources. In interpersonal communication, the person might consult either an expert source, such as a "cosmopolite" or a technical specialist, or he might consult a close peer.[14] Now it is clear that the lay person's relationship to the expert will be heterophilic, and to the peer homophilic, as a rule. Thus the expertise dimension of credibility should be negatively correlated with interpersonal homophily. Put another way, there is more to learn from people who are different than from people who are a lot like oneself. In diffusion research, this principle is called "The Strength of Weak Ties", reflecting the fact that contacts between dissimilar people are rare ("Weak Ties") but when they occur they are more likely than other contacts to result in information transfer ("Strength," for purposes of diffusion).[15]

Several studies demonstrate that homophilic interpersonal networks often carry highly inaccurate information, much of it internally inconsistent.[16] People seem to sense this. For instance, when President John F. Kennedy was shot, the news was so rapidly disseminated that some 90% of U.S. citizens had heard about it before he died.[17] One study found that 44% of those who first heard about it via television completely believed it; but only 24% believed the news when they heard it first from a good friend, and only 16% when told by others.[18] In a study of a flash flood, most people received several warnings before evacuating.[19] Interpersonal sources were responsible for only about one-third of people's first and second warnings, but one-half of later warnings. The media were consulted for confirmation of interpersonal warnings; source credibility made no difference in decisions to evacuate, but repeated warnings from varied sources did. A study of reactions to the Watergate scandals of early 1973, when the veracity of the charges against the Nixon

administration was still very much in doubt, found that people believed interpersonal sources less often than any mass media source of Watergate news.[20] Most studies that report positive correlations between use and perceived credibility of a source also find very little use of interpersonal channels.[21] Several surveys have reported null or even negative correlations between use and credibility; generally interpersonal communication has been more prevalent in these cases.[22]

The simple assumption that homophilic sources are more effective was directly contradicted in an advertising experiment in Hong Kong.[23] Five ads were prepared in two dialects: Cantonese, which was the regional dialect and therefore presumably homophilic, and Mandarin, a northern Chinese dialect traditionally associated with the elite class. Recall of content from the ads was greater among those who had read the Mandarin (heterophilic) versions, and among older subjects at least the products themselves were rated more favorably after the Mandarin ads than the Cantonese ads. This result could be easily explained on the basis of, say, status appeal, but it does not jibe at all with a homophily-breeds-credibility explanation of message reception and acceptance.

The Frequency Criterion

Two convergent bodies of research are often cited to support the general conclusion that interpersonal sources are more persuasive than mediated sources. In keeping with the actuarial nature of communication research conducted from the sender's viewpoint, both rely on frequency as the criterion for inferring causation. That is, the usual empirical finding is that more people make their decision following interpersonal contact than following media exposure on the issue at hand. By far the more thoroughly investigated of these two has been the diffusion of innovations, where the statistical conclusion can scarcely be in doubt. The second is the study of influence in election campaigns, where the evidence is much more limited and questionable.

Diffusion research is ordinarily conducted in rural, traditional societal settings, where a "modern" innovation is being presented for possible adoption. In such situations there are usually a few relatively more "modern" people, who more readily learn of and

adopt the innovation; these people are also more cosmopolitan, in that they have both personal and media contacts outside the immediate locale.[24] Later adopters (called "laggards" by program sponsors impatient with delays in the adoption process) are more likely to rely on interpersonally mediated information. Media channels are less accessible to them (for such reasons as illiteracy and poverty), and by the time they have heard much about the innovation there are plenty of other people in the area who know a lot about it so interpersonal sources are highly accessible. We should expect, then, that their channels will be primarily interpersonal by the time they hear about and adopt the innovation.[25]

These findings do not, however, lead inevitably to the conclusion that interpersonal channels are preferred by the poor and illiterate who, because of their large numbers in a developing society, constitute the main target for diffusion. A variety of studies show that the more educated strata delay longer in making the decision to change their behavior.[26] For instance, a survey of 500 Taiwanese women found that those who were younger and more educated were better informed about family planning, discussed it more with their husbands, were more likely to consult specialists in clinics and hospitals, got more information from television and other media, and were more likely to adopt a family planning method.[27] Similarly, during a disease inoculation program in Honduras, a comparison was made of "instantaneous" vs. "protracted" deciders.[28] The first group consisted of those who had first heard of the inoculation on the day they came to get their shots. The "protracted" decision group, i.e. people who had heard about it before the day they came for shots, were both more literate and more likely to have discussed it with other people.

In general, then, the distinguishing features of more educated people include a disinclination to adopt an innovation immediately, and a tendency to take control of their information environment by seeking additional viewpoints from the best accessible sources before making a personal decision. Whether the channels of contact with those sources are direct or mediated makes no apparent difference, in terms of either the credence given the information or its influence on the decision made.

The fallacy of using frequency of use as a criterion for evaluating either the effectiveness or the attractiveness of a channel can be demonstrated by a few comparisons.

In the diffusion of news, for instance, there are large differences from one news item to another in the percentage who learn of it interpersonally. Unexpected, dramatic, and important items are often heard from others who are relaying the news: the deaths of leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt[29] and Chiang Kai-Shek[30], the assassinations of the Kennedys[31], the shooting of Gov. George Wallace[32], and (in a Harvard student survey) the resignation of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew.[33] These and other studies consistently find that it is the younger, college educated person who is most likely to tell others of news he has heard.[34] But there is also a lot of news that doesn't seem important enough to pass on. Examples include a major papal encyclical (heard of interpersonally by just 2%)[35] and the political assassinations of George Lincoln Rockwell, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X (each 3%).[36] Timing coincidences also determine where one learns news. Most people in Japan who knew of a solo crossing of the Pacific Ocean by a young man in 1962 read about it in their newspapers. Half of them went on to tell someone else about it, but in almost all cases found that the other person had already read about it too; interpersonal channels consequently brought the news to only 3%.[37] An even more obvious instance of simultaneous media reception was the 1964 announcement by President Lyndon B. Johnson that he would not run for re-election; only about 5% first learned of this important decision interpersonally, mainly because it was made on an evening telecast to which almost all households were tuned in.[38] Now obviously these huge differences in frequency of interpersonal reception are no indicator of people's channel preferences. They are due to such structural and environmental factors as timing, and newsworthiness as judged by potential interpersonal disseminators of the news.

Looking beyond the matter of immediate dissemination of a single item of information, frequency is no better a clue to source preferences in studies of more chronic or habitual patterns of channel use. A Detroit survey found that 51% considered newspapers their most important channel for information on politics, and another 21% ranked the newspaper second.[39] Other media were also important: 45% ranked broadcast media first or second, as did 21% for magazines. Interpersonal sources were listed first or second by only 17%. On the other hand, a survey of Canadian farmers found that they relied mostly on "commercial interpersonal

sources" (i.e. salesmen) for information on innovations like herbicides and seed corn.[40] You get your information where you can find it, not from a source that is preferred or more credible or more homophilous.

Channels obviously differ greatly in the kinds of information they carry. A survey in Jordan found that farmers got 88% of their political information via mass media, but 91% of their agricultural information interpersonally.[41] The reason was easy to find: a content analysis found political news aplenty in the press, but practically no agricultural content. At another extreme are people who never use mass media because they cannot, or because media are not available to them. When inhabitants of a remote African village were asked to keep diaries of their communicatory activities, it turned out that 98% of all recorded events were interpersonal.[42] Males were seven times as likely as females to report media use (radio and reading), but this was limited to males aged 26-50, and even their media activities fell essentially to zero in the busy agricultural months of summer. The structural and situational differences in frequencies of channel use are huge, and no assertion of psychological motivations is needed to explain them. (If asked to evaluate various channels, though, we should expect most people to ascribe higher credibility and other favorable attributes to those which they use than to others that are not available to them for some reason.)

Election campaign research has, since the classic 1940 Erie County study, been widely thought to demonstrate the superiority of interpersonal over mass communication as a source of influence.[43] Examination of the original data, however, reveals that the media -- even in that pre-television era -- were judged more powerful by most voters. A slight majority cited either radio (38%) or newspapers (23%) as the most important single source in making their voting decisions. Two-thirds found each of these media helpful.[44] About one-half of those who changed their voting intentions during the campaign cited something learned from either the newspaper or radio as the main source of change.[45] On the other hand, less than half mentioned any personal contact as an influential source, and less than one-fourth considered an interpersonal source as the most important one.[46] Apparently the emphasis on interpersonal influence emanating from the Erie County study was due more to

the contrast between these figures and the researchers' expectations for far more dramatic evidence of media impact. Figures from the 1948 Elmira study are not appreciably different, and yet the stress on interpersonal influence persisted in the interpretations drawn.[47] Subsequently the same research group undertook a concerted study of personal influence across a wider variety of topics.[48] As the authors reported, 58% of the reported opinion changes "were apparently made without involving any remembered personal contact, and were, very often, dependent upon the mass media."[49]

Since those studies are the ones that continue to be cited as the basic evidence on the question of media vs. interpersonal influence, one might be tempted to take them at face value and conclude that the evidence indicates that mediated communication is more persuasive. But, as stressed earlier here, this competition is a synthetic one. Just as frequency of use is not a valid criterion for inferring higher credibility or preference for a channel, neither is recalled influence a valid criterion for concluding that one channel is capable of achieving stronger effects than another. Mass media, where they exist and carry information relevant to a decision facing the person, seem to have some advantages. They provide more professional editing and verification services, and probably for that reason are on balance more likely to be believed. Far more important, the media are more amenable to control -- by both the sender and the receiver -- for various purposes. Sources can to a great extent determine what information they will release via the media. Receivers can count on the media to provide them with certain kinds and amounts of information in a relatively coherent package when needed. But wise utilizers of information rarely rely on mass media alone; they do well to check with experts, compare notes with peers, and otherwise attempt to validate media content for themselves before acting upon it. This is what we find better educated receivers doing, in all kinds of situations. The question of which channel reaches a person first is, for all the research attention lavished upon it (see above), a fatuous one in terms of telling us anything important about the people involved.

when exposure to media was controlled statistically.[51] Another survey found requests for partisan campaign materials higher among people who expected to be discussing the election.[52] The phenomenon is not limited to political topics. Clarke, for example, found that adolescents' information-seeking regarding both symphony music, and in a separate study popular music, was strongly related to the existence of others with whom this type of music was discussed.[53]

A number of motivations have been suggested to account for this tendency to attend to mass media in anticipation of interpersonal communication. A time-honored hypothesis in sociology is the purpose of attaining social status by appearing to be well informed.[54] For example, Berelson felt it was "obvious how this use of the newspaper serves to increase the reader's prestige among his fellows."[55] A study in England concluded that listening to popular music is a way in which adolescents who perform poorly in school can gain compensating peer approval.[56] Another motivation, more difficult to isolate empirically, is simply to have something to discuss with others, for no other purpose than to provide a basis for interaction -- "small talk."[57] A more other-centered motivation might be called "altruistic." It is possible that a person would seek, or at least pass on, information for the benefit of other people who might need it. This was one self-reported reason for interpersonal dissemination within the distance running community of news of the accidental death of a famous runner, for example.[58]

But the motivation that dominates the research literature, and probably the real world as well, is to have information that can be used in the service of interpersonal influence attempts. In election studies especially, those who report that they try to persuade others to support their candidate are consistently found to be the heaviest consumers of news media.[59] An analysis of the 1964 U.S. national election study demonstrates how strong this relationship is. Among those who said they followed politics in each of four media (newspapers, television, radio, and magazines), 54% said they had also tried to persuade someone to vote their way. Only 34% of those who reported using just three of the four media also made influence attempts, and the figure drops to a bare 2% among those who do not follow politics in any medium.[60] In this study, interpersonal influence attempts proved to be the strongest correlate of public affairs media use, and the second strongest

Getting and Giving Information

To this point a less than satisfying set of conclusions can be offered: different people seek different kinds of information via different channels from different sources for different purposes. A comparison between mediated and interpersonal channels is of little use from the perspective of communication effects. Seen from the receiver's perspective, channels are not evaluated for their homophily or credibility, nearly so much as they are sorted out for accessibility and the likelihood that they will provide needed or useful information. We have lots of specifics, but few useful generalizations about the differential roles of various kinds of channels in the overall processes of message flow, knowledge diffusion, and social change.

This problem is probably better approached from the standpoint of people rather than of channels. The static concept of "interpersonal channels" slightly masks the fact that people are actively doing several things with the information flowing from mass media. They are both asking and telling one another about it, often with a good deal of personal interpretation and opinion mixed in. Only as an outgrowth of these behaviors of asking and (sometimes after being asked) telling is there an interpersonal dissemination of information, which is the transaction that carries the possibility of personal influence as a communication process. A small research literature has, almost by inadvertence, built up on each of these specific interpersonal behaviors. We know a few things about the kinds of people involved, and their motivations, in each specific role in interpersonal dissemination.

Recommunication of information to others appears to be at least as important as personal use of that information in making decisions, as an explanation for mass media consumption. That is, many people seem to gather news and other media content largely for the purpose of passing it on to others. In studies of self-reported "gratifications" of media use, this interpersonal motive tends to be rated low; there may be some social undesirability associated with so commonplace a purpose. But it is a strong correlate of information seeking.[50] Becker found in two studies that this self-reported motive was the strongest predictor of attention to political news; it was a better predictor of knowledge than were similar measures specifically related to knowledge-acquisition motivations,

was writing letters to public officials -- another, less personal, attempt at political influence.

A modest study using a quite different method gives us some idea of the extent to which media content is employed in interpersonal influence. Students in a college class were assigned to keep records on conversations they overheard in public places.[61] Not only was information from news media frequently cited in support of overheard arguments, but this was more often the case when the target person expressed a change in opinion (i.e. when persuasion was apparently successful). Politics, which constitutes the bulk of news media content, is the dominant topic in this connection; 76% of conversations dealing with political topics included media references, compared to only 40% of other conversations.

The Special Role of Print Media

One common thread running through the studies relating media attention to interpersonal discussion is that the print media constitute the primary channel for this sort of purposeful use. For example, a survey of senior citizens found that their social participation in meetings was positively correlated with reading magazines, books, and newspapers, but not with use of television or radio; frequency of visiting friends was mainly correlated with book reading.[62] A Wisconsin study showed that people who do not read a newspaper are also unlikely to visit with relatives, neighbors, fellow workers, or others.[63] In Appalachia, Donohew found organizational participation and frequency of visits to town among the activities that were correlated positively with reading of newspapers and magazines, but negatively with radio and TV use.[64] A Minneapolis survey showed that time spent visiting people was the strongest predictor of magazine use, and organizational membership the strongest predictor of book reading; neither of these measures predicted television or radio use.[65] In a Japanese community, those who gave others political advice were more likely to read the newspaper regularly.[66] Wisconsin farm women who read newspapers were the most involved in social contact and talking with others.[67] In an urban sample, discussion of an election campaign correlated more strongly with newspaper and magazine reading than with attention to campaign and convention television programs; this

finding still held up after education, income, and general political interest were controlled statistically.[68] Even newspaper comic strips have been identified as a frequent topic of interpersonal discussion.[69] Media "gratifications" studies find anticipated communication a stronger motivation for newspaper use than for TV.[70] Other studies cited above to document the general principle of interpersonal motivations for media information acquisition dealt specifically with print media (see footnotes 52 and 53).

Here we have what appears to be a genuine channel difference, in the superiority of print over broadcast media in the service of interpersonal communication needs. But the general principles to account for this difference are those we have noted earlier, i.e. accessibility and information available. The latter point is probably not so important, although there certainly is more information on most topics to be found in print than via radio and television. Accessibility of some sort is surely the more powerful factor, and at first blush it would seem to favor the electronic media. Radio, and where TV is widely diffused it too, are certainly more available as channels than are print media. In the U.S., for example, only about 70% of all adults say they read a daily newspaper, whereas virtually 100% watch TV. Radio receivers are to be found in some of the most remote villages of the underdeveloped countries, where illiteracy is an overwhelming barrier to use of print. But the <u>specific accessibility</u> of print gives it an enormous advantage over broadcast channels. Great amounts of information can be stored and later, when needed, retrieved; many more topics are covered in print, in much greater detail; and print is generally about as accessible as broadcast media, for the kind of person who is most likely to be involved in either information-seeking or influence attempts -- educated, fairly affluent, etc. Radio and TV send a person information of their choosing, on their schedule. With print, both timing and content selection are much more under the control of a purposive media user. This is not to say that broadcast media are <u>inherently</u> limited in terms of specific accessibility; recent innovations such as cable TV and cassette systems are already expanding users' control. But print remains far more amenable to purposive use for the forseeable future.

Probably the best data on this point come from an experiment by Atkin.[71] He randomly assigned high school students to anticipated discussion groups. They were told that they would later be called on to discuss either national, local, or school topics. The amount of total media attention was not affected by this manipulation, but patterns of use were reorganized so that selection of stories was affected. Those assigned to the national topics discussion group were more likely to read national stories in the newspaper; those who were to discuss school topics were subsequently more likely to read newspaper articles about the school. For broadcast media, though, the experimental effect was too weak to reach statistical significance. There was some evidence of a shift in the newscasts the student listened to (national vs. local) but this degree of selectivity is hardly enough to meet an immediate need for information on specific topics.

Specific accessibility to a discrete category of information within a channel needs, then, to be distinguished clearly from the looser concept of accessibility to various channels. While there is little research directly relevant to the point, the concept of specific accessibility might be extended to the interpersonal domain as well. This assumes that there are some people whom one can consult on a particular topic at one's convenience, much as one might look something up in a book. This brings us to the topic of interpersonal requests for information and opinion.

Asking As a Transaction

Neither information nor influence attempts flow in one direction. A number of studies have found that the predominant interpersonal pattern is exchange, in that most people who try to persuade others are themselves likely to be targets of similar attempts.[72] And as has already been noted here, those who seek information are also inclined to pass it along to others. While it has become standard to view communication exchanges as "transactions", those transactions are not ordinarily looked at from the viewpoint of each party separately. In an interpersonal transaction, if one person is asking for information the other person is being asked.

Little research attention has been given to the phenomenon of being asked for information, or even for opinion. We know from experimental studies of small, task-oriented groups

that opinions are given more often than information, whereas information is sought more often than opinion.[73] Messages of both types are sent much more often than they are requested. A few studies give us at least a preliminary picture of the relationship between those who request information and those who respond to such requests. Where asking is concerned, we cannot distinguish clearly between information and opinion; more researchers have been interested in opinion flow, and that is the type of request they have typically examined. (From the viewpoint of the asker this is probably not terribly important; since much of information-seeking is evaluative, and since active seekers usually are comparing viewpoints from different perspectives, to ask for an opinion may well be the predominant and most enriching mode of eliciting information flow interpersonally.)

One study employed a seven-item scale to identify "opinion leaders" and six of those items were measures of the person's likelihood of being asked for opinion -- rather than his being motivated to influence someone else. Those who were asked their opinions were more likely to be active members of organizations, to regularly read news magazines and newspapers, and to discuss public affairs.[74] Targets of personal information requests, then, have the same characteristics as do media from which information is sought: they are more accessible (as indicated by frequent discussion) and more likely to have information (as indicated by media use).

The profile of askees is more complicated then that, though. One analysis of a U.S. national sample separated people who tried to influence someone else ("talkers") from those who made no such effort but who were nevertheless asked their opinions ("passive leaders").[75] The talkers were more informed than were the passive leaders, although both groups were much better informed than were people who were not sources at all. In a Chicago study, giving advice about shopping was not significantly correlated with either attempted influence or media exposure.[76] (Influence attempts and media use were, as in other studies above, strongly intercorrelated.) A survey in Chile found no appreciable demographic difference between people who were asked their opinions on current problems and others; the non-distinguishing variables included income, class, education, occupation, and age.[77] The unique characteristic of the askees was that, when asked by the interviewer for an opinion

(about local newspapers), they were four times as likely to express one as were other respondents.

It is the asker-askee relationship that, when separated from influence attempts, seems to be the homophilous one. Those of whom opinions are requested, and who otherwise do not volunteer their views or exercise persuasive designs on their listeners, are indeed demographically similar to their interaction partners. They are a bit more attentive to the media, a bit more informed, and do answer questions when the occasion arises. But these homophilous relationships are more involved in the flow of information and ideas than in any active influence process. (Whether askers purposely seek homophilous informants, or simply seek informants locally and therefore find homophilous ones, cannot be determined from the data available.)

Seekers of information (and opinion), on the other hand, appear to be quite different from other people. Sears and Freedman examined a number of studies in a vain search for evidence that people attempt selectively to expose themselves to views favoring their own side of an issue.[78] What was found instead was that a person tends to seek out viewpoints he has not yet heard, whether they might agree with his opinion or not -- when they would be useful to know about. The other strong predictors of voluntary exposure to information were education (and correlated social class), and a previous history of exposure to the same topic. Taking these characteristics as a group produces a paradoxical-yet-sensible formulation: potentially useful information is most likely to be sought by a person who knows enough (about the subject) to recognize deficiencies in his knowledge.

Subsequent research has borne this out in various ways. One study compared people who sought information (about civil defense) to the general population, and found that the seekers were already more informed about the subject.[79] Predictably too, they were more likely to ask others about it, and to be themselves asked for such information. In a Japanese communications union, the attentive readers of the organization's internal newspaper (less than 10% of all members) were the active members, who participated most often in meetings and demonstrations.[80] A field experiment in which some people were mailed a brochure (on lawn care) had the effect of stimulating them to seek further information from expert sources.[81]

(There was also considerable follow-up discussion with family and friends, but this was not associated with much acceptance of the mailed information beyond that which had been accepted immediately.)

A study in India compared a traditional village to one that was farther along in the process of social and economic development. There was more use of interpersonal information sources (who were often heavy media users) in the better-developed village.[82] This suggests that once a community process of "education" in a broadened sense is begun, it stimulates information seeking and dissemination, via both mediated and personal channels. Another survey, dealing with family planning, found a positive correlation between SES and interpersonal acquisition of rare information about birth control, but a negative association between SES and consultation of interpersonal sources regarding methods that were widely diffused.[83] People with a greater range of social skills are probably more able to exploit the resources in their local information environments. The transaction between individual and social structure is illuminated by another finding in this study: people low on the socioeconomic ladder were more likely to know about all types of methods if they lived in socially mixed neighborhoods than if they were in homogeneously poor districts. This suggests that the "Strength of Weak Ties" principle (above) is more a matter of physical propinquity than of social stratification itself.[84] This formulation of the "Weak Ties" concept was advanced by Granovetter in his study of diffusion of information between socioeconomic peers living in different geographical regions of a metropolitan area and consequently not often in communication.[85]

Opinion-seeking is a bit different from information-seeking, and the people who specifically seek (without giving) opinions are not like those who actively search for information and offer opinions. People who said they were more likely than others to ask for voting advice during an election campaign tended to be young, female, in large families, and low in political interest, knowledge, and party identification.[86] They relied more on TV and less on newspapers than did those who gave or shared opinions with others.

Risk As a Stimulus

When behavioral change is suggested to, or contemplated by, a person, an important determinant of information-seeking is the perception of risk. In the area of consumer behavior, this has been clearly demonstrated by the work of Cox and Bauer.[87] For example, doctors' preference for professional over commercial information sources is considerably stronger when a serious disease or a dangerous drug is involved in the information search. Uncertainty is a closely related concept; doctors exercise more care in seeking information about newer drugs, and those whose effects are least understood.[88]

Consultation with experts, and their special publications, becomes more common whenever a person is seriously considering a risky action. This was found, for example, in a study of abortion information among college women.[89] Surveys of the use of mind-altering drugs by students yield the same conclusion.[90] Drug users, who perhaps see little risk, rely for their information on friends and other drug users. Consultation of expert and media sources is much more common among those who have considered certain drugs but then decided not to use them, a behavior pattern that suggests an initial perception that serious risks were involved.

The importance of risk as a stimulant to information and opinion exchange is illustrated in a more social context by a study in a Kansas river basin area. Two alternative methods of flood control were being considered, one a dam and the other a more sophisticated "watershed" project. A heavy year-long media campaign was conducted on behalf of the watershed approach, but polls showed no increase in the proportion of pro-watershed to pro-dam arguments expressed by people in the community after the campaign. Instead, the incidence of arguments on both sides of the issue increased, despite the one-sided media campaign.[91] Very few people had been converted from their original opinions, but there were many who had been initially undecided who had during the campaign discussed the issue heavily; they had mostly developed pro-watershed opinions. Significantly from the standpoint of risk, these were mostly people who lived downstream from the proposed flood control site. People who lived upstream had less personal stake in the outcome, and consequently did not discuss the issue much. In the interpersonal exchanges downstream, arguments on both sides came out --

an apparent "boomerang" of the media campaign -- but the final result was the desired shift in favor of the watershed project.

Barriers to Information Exchange

In focusing on accessibility and information availability as determinants of channel use, we should not leave the impression that interpersonal contact is a simple, straightforward matter once a person determines who knows what he wants to find out. There are a number of barriers to interpersonal exchange that do not obtain in the case of the mass media. These include several factors that are much more social in nature than the simple matter of spatial separation noted in connection with "Weak Ties" (above).

For one thing, interpersonal transmission is of discouragingly low fidelity. Both speaking and hearing are casual, unstudied behaviors for most of us most of the time. We should not be surprised that messages become greatly distorted as they move along interpersonal chains, as has been demonstrated in experiments on "rumor" transmission. Much information gets lost, and misinformation added, in the process of retelling. These are not random errors; information that fits an overall structure is likely to be retained, while that which is incompatible with this structure drops out, so that a story "gets better" as it moves along.[92] While becoming more simplified and organized around a single theme, it also "loses a lot in the telling." While the same charges can rightly be leveled at the news media, they do not apply in nearly the same degree as in the typical interpersonal network.

There are also topics people will simply not talk about. Rogers points out a number of "taboo" subjects related to birth control, for example.[93] Only about one-third of family planning conversation pairs among mothers in two Korean villages had ever discussed abortion, he found.

One point of homophily is that people seem to avoid talking about certain subjects when they would be at a social disadvantage vis-a-vis the other person. For example, even among married couples there is little discussion of schools if there is more than one year's difference in education between the husband and the wife.[94] Even more important as a constraint is the asymmetry in conversation due to role differences. Many interactions are conducted

according to implicit rules that limit information flow to one direction. For example, several surveys have found that reporters are well aware of the political views of legislators they interview, but the politicians are in their turn quite ignorant of the opinions held by the reporters.[95] The reason is fairly obvious: in an interview it is appropriate for the legislator to express his views, and for the reporter to withhold his.

Withholding of opinion or information is also a common interpersonal behavior, although little studied (since "nothing" overt has happened). Experts who charge for their information (e.g. doctors, lawyers) are reluctant to dispense it to just anyone who asks. More significant, there is often an advantage to having information others lack, or to depriving someone else of needed knowledge. The hoarding of information within the interpersonal sphere is a subject worthy of considerable investigation.[96]

A fascinating theory about barriers to interpersonal discussion of politics has been proposed by Noelle-Neumann on the basis of her studies of recent election campaigns in West Germany.[97] She notes that individuals do not change much over time in their own opinions, but they are quite sensitive to shifts in the dominant opinion in the society at large. When the person is a member of the party that is leading, willingness to discuss the election is high and rather constant; such people are about equally likely to talk politics with others they disagree with as they are with people who hold the same views as theirs. But when one's party is falling into a minority position, discussion tends to be limited to others in that same party. The result is growing polarization in the total system, as the minority party's members become increasingly isolated from other citizens and perceive greater differences between themselves and others than actually exist. Noelle-Neumann calls this phenomenon "the spiral of silence." It is an excellent example of the way in which news and social processes can interact to produce outcomes that would not be predictable on the basis of either media or interpersonal influences alone.

Conclusions

This paper has sketched an outline of structural factors in a person's communication environment that can account for findings that have led to the mistaken notion that interpersonal channels are more persuasive than mass-mediated channels. The key variables advanced

here have been accessibility to a channel, and the likelihood of finding a given kind of information in it. These structural factors apply equally to mass and interpersonal channels. Conceptually, message sources are distinguished from channels, even though they may be empirically identical in the case of some interpersonal communication.

The structure of a person's communication environment, in terms of accessibility to information, is largely determined by sources. Whether they use personal or media channels, sources organize their efforts to get certain kinds of information to certain people. Some topics, such as political ones, activate interpersonal channels; campaigns initiated via the media can have a similar impact on behalf of other kinds of interests. Communication planning needs to take this relationship, and the latent interpersonal channels surrounding each member of a target audience, into account. To think in terms of a competition between media and interpersonal channels is to misdirect one's attention from the most important factors governing the flow of information.

Although the sponsors of communication programs may distinguish sharply between both the channels they utilize, and the kinds of messages and goals -- informative vs. persuasive -- at stake, receivers ordinarily do not. When one is contemplating a decision or a possible modification of habitual behavior, both facts and opinion are welcome, from whatever channels can provide them. Sources that might know something useful (and tell it) are preferred, and the person uses those accessible channels that might provide an addition to his store of such knowledge. Usually this involves little active effort or sorting of channels; one can normally count on the information environment to provide a fairly satisfactory flow of useful knowledge and opinion. Under unusual conditions, the external structure activates itself to increase this flow. Or the person can, when motivated by heightened interest or perceived risk, take steps to elicit stepped-up message flow to him.

Limitations on these capacities are mostly structural or interactive, not especially to be found in failings of the individual receiver. As Ettema and Kline have noted, the evidence points to differences in functional needs, rather than deficits in personal communicatory capabilities, as the most likely explanation for "knowledge gaps" in society.[98]

Rogers too argues for abandonment of "individual blame" explanations of the "failure" of some people to get information and adopt technological innovations.[99] There are huge and obvious differences in the extent to which people are serviced by media information channels. What needs to be further recognized is that there are also enormous, if less obvious, differences among interpersonal information environments. These differences, for both types of channels, involve variations among people in their access to sources of useful and trustworthy information.

If a receiver limited himself to a single channel (as a source might), a print medium would be preferable. Specific accessibility for a given topic at a given time is greatest with print, and the media are generally responsible for collecting, verifying, and transmitting many kinds of information. But to use print media requires that they be accessible, a condition that is lacking in many underdeveloped settings. More important, the receiver usually has multiple channels, via which he may consult a variety of sources. This enables him to compare different viewpoints and achieve his own synthesis in the context of his immediate social and personal situation. If, following review of a reasonable body of relevant information and opinion, a person decides not to modify his previous patterns of behavior, that decision deserves to be respected even if it is contrary to the source's purposes.

Footnotes

1. David O. Sears and Jonathan L. Freedman, "Selective exposure to information: a critical review," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1967, 31: 194-213.

2. The research literature on information-seeking is far too extensive to review here. An important synthesis of the ideas that the audience is an active partner in mass communication transactions, when motivated by high risk, is Raymond A. Bauer, "The obstinate audience: the influence process from the point of view of social communication," American Psychologist, 1964, 19: 319-28.

3. Florangel Z. Rosario, "The leader in family planning and the two-step flow model," Journalism Quarterly, 1971, 48: 288-97.

4. Steven H. Chaffee, "The interpersonal context of mass communication," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor (eds.), Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972) pp. 95-120. See also fn. 21.

5. Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker, Communication of Innovations (New York: Free Press, 1971). See especially pp. 255-58.

6. The literature supporting this generalization is voluminous.

7. Chaffee, op. cit., fn. 4. Rogers and Shoemaker, op. cit., fn. 5.

8. This finding is well established in experimental literature dating from Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold H. Kelley, Communication and Persuasion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) Ch. 2.

9. The line of reasoning outlined here is oversimplified, in comparison with the theoretical literature. Rogers and Shoemaker (op. cit., fn. 5) view homophily and credibility as parallel factors that both predict success by change agents (pp. 240-46). They note that commercial change agents, while they can encourage trial of an innovation, are not as persuasive as peers (or non-commercial change agents) because they lack credibility. Later, Rogers found that change agents were judged most credible by those with whom they worked most frequently (Modernization Among Peasants, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969, pp. 184-86), but also that media credibility had little relationship to media effects upon modernization. Katz suggests that peer interpersonal communication is mainly important for "legitimation" of information received from less credible sources. Elihu Katz, "The social itinerary of technical change," in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (eds.), Process and Effects of Mass Communication, Rev. Ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 761-97. Many writers stress that a limitation on the effectiveness of mass media is their impersonality and distance from the individual receiver, but this makes the media more useful for some purposes (cf. Chaffee, fn. 4).

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13. Rosario, op. cit., fn. 3.

14. On the distinction between "cosmopolite" and "localite" channels (sources), see Rogers and Shoemaker, op. cit., fn. 5, pp. 258-59.

15. Everett M. Rogers, "Network analysis of the diffusion of innovations," in Daniel Lerner and Lyle Nelson (eds.), Communication Research -- A Half-Century Appraisal (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977). William T. Liu and Robert W. Duff, "The Strength in Weak Ties," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1972, 36: 361-66.

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